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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: FORMER PM MIKATI INSISTS HE SUPPORTS SINIORA

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

11. (S/NF) In a 11/8 meeting with the Ambassador, former Prime Minister Najib Mikati -- on a two-day pause in Beirut from a month of globe-trotting -- expressed deep annoyance at the suggestion that he might be a tool in pro-Syrian hands to oust the Siniora government. He has been and will remain strong in his public and private support of Siniora, he said (and after the Ambassador left issued a press statement rejecting the threat or use of street demonstrations to bring down Siniora). Mikati expressed deep concern about Hizballah's alliance with Michel Aoun, believing that it had evolved during the summer conflict into something more durable, dangerous, and anti-Sunni. While he admitted ambitions to return as Prime Minister, he said that he would not do so in the current environment and not at the expense of Siniora. He admitted giving the pro-Syrian/pro-Iranian al-Akhbar USD 150,000 in start-up capital (triple Mikati's previous admission to us) but claimed to have cut all ties to the newspaper out of disgust for its editorial line. End summary.

MIKATI INSISTS HE SUPPORTS SINIORA

12. (S/NF) The Ambassador reviewed with Mikati -- just back from Europe and just before traveling to New York -- U.S. concerns that he could be plotting with the pro-Syrians or, alternatively, be the unwitting beneficiary of a pro-Syrian plot to replace Fouad Siniora as Prime Minister. That, the Ambassador cautioned, would have severe implications for his relationship with the United States; Mikati should not expect the warm cooperation with the U.S. he enjoyed as Prime Minister if he came to power on the ashes of the Siniora government.

13. (S/NF) Mikati expressed deep annoyance with the message, insisting that he has been strong in his public and private support of Fouad Siniora and would continue to be. "Jeff, you know me too well to accuse me of that," Mikati complained. Siniora has performed extremely well and brought great international help to Lebanon. Not only is Mikati not trying to replace Siniora, but he is opposed to the effort to replace him now at all, by any means. (As if to reinforce this point, Mikati issued a press statement after the Ambassador left noting his opposition to using the threat of intimidation or street demonstrations to topple or change the Siniora cabinet.) Siniora repeated previous arguments that he and Bashar al-Asad are no longer close. The Ambassador

cautioned Mikati that, even if he is not involved directly, others may be counting on promoting him as PM once Siniora is out of the way. Mikati admitted that he believed he did a good job as PM in 2005 and deserved to be considered again. One cannot blame him for ambition and "for wanting to help my country." But he vowed not to be used as a tool against Siniora, nor to take office in this atmosphere at the expense of Siniora.

MIKATI FEARS ANTI-SUNNI ALLIANCE
OF MICHEL AOUN AND HIZBALLAH

¶4. (S/NF) Noting the escalating rhetoric, the Ambassador asked Mikati's views of the days and weeks ahead. (Note: This meeting took place before the Shia ministers resigned on 11/11. End note.) Mikati thought that Hizballah and Michel Aoun would "go all the way" in trying to achieve control of the cabinet, either by grabbing a blocking minority or by toppling Siniora altogether. "All the way" might include violent street demonstrations. Hizballah and Aoun are now closer than they were before the war, Mikati thought, and their tightened alliance was also more dangerous, in his view. Aoun has convinced his followers that the Sunnis are a threat, and the Shia need no convincing. Hizballah will now support Aoun for president, Mikati predicted. Asked what he would do if he were PM facing the Aoun-Hizballah threat, Mikati had two suggestions: try to court Berri, as Berri is "more Lebanese" than Hizballah and might be persuaded not to participate in taking the country to chaos, and "be strong, don't back down" in the face of provocations.

MONEY TO AL-AKHBAR

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¶5. (S/NF) The Ambassador asked Mikati what his true relationship is with the pro-Syrian, pro-Iranian newspaper, al-Akhbar. Mikati said that he was "ashamed" to admit now that he had provided USD 150,000 in start-up capital (thrice the amount he had previously acknowledged), as part of his overall investment strategy of helping all Lebanese media enough to help ward off unfavorable press. But, disgusted by the newspaper's barely disguised propaganda, he refuses further involvement. He is not one of the owners, he insisted.

COMMENT

¶6. (S/NF) A billionaire, Mikati can bide his time until his country calls him again. Unlike fellow billionaire and pro-Syrian politician Issam Fares (in self-imposed exile on his Monaco-based yacht ever since March 2005), however, Mikati is still in the political game. His globe-trotting allows him to burnish his credentials as a senior statesman, giving a speech before the International Crisis Group one week and meeting Kofi Annan (probably arranged by his friend Terje Roed-Larsen) the next. His almost continued absence from Lebanon in recent weeks does not prove his innocence in plots to oust Siniora, of course, but his denials have a ring of sincerity -- and of self-interest. After all, he will be better positioned to find broad support as a fall-back prime ministerial candidate if he remains above efforts to change the government. After all, Mikati did a credible job as PM in a difficult transitional period, and he seems to be counting on his reputation from that experience rather than his "friend-and-financier-of-Bashar" pro-Syrian history as his best chance for returning to office someday.

FELTMAN